

The Death of an Artisan:

Su Shi and Ink Making

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IN THE AUTUMN OF 1084, SU SHI 蘇軾 (*hao* 號 [alternative name] Dongpo 東坡; 1037–1101) became implicated in an artisan's death. Four years into a sentence of exile for his political protests in verse, the preeminent Northern Song poet, or "Immortal Po" (Poxian 坡仙) as he became known to his admirers, drafted a short ode for a contemporaneous ink maker named Pan Gu 潘谷 (n.d.), a piece that appears to have been intended as a gift in exchange for a new supply of ink. In the final couplet, Su conferred on the craftsman the honorary epithet of the Ink Immortal (Moxian 墨仙), celebrating the reputation of a master who had attained a form of transcendence through his diligent labor. Shortly thereafter, rumors started to circulate that Pan had

ABSTRACT: Su Shi's endorsement of an enigmatic artisan named Pan Gu as "the Ink Immortal" adumbrates the Chinese cultural valorization of ink production during and after the Song period. I parse the poet's two-part effort to transform ink making into a legitimate field of scholarly endeavor in order to defend poets' autonomy. In Su Shi's view, such autonomy depends on controlling the tools that sustain literary self-expression. Resisting the passive position of a consumer, Su first identifies with and then comes to impersonate the artisan's productive body. This pose was, however, predicated on Su's struggle to influence the marketing of ink through verse and innovative strategies of inscription. After Su Shi, an inkstick was no longer simply a tool for the production of literature but a venue where distinctions between writing and craft could be transformed—a contested subject and substrate of literary art.

摘要：本文通過蘇軾有關墨師潘谷的詩作來探討宋代文人與墨工之間的互動關係。蘇軾通過讚揚墨工的自主性以反思文人的身份，其對玩墨與造墨的記載揭示了書寫工具對詩歌創新的影響。從蘇軾筆下之潘谷的形象演變中，我們可以看到一種中國古代特有的媒介自覺性。

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drunkenly fallen into a stone well and dissolved, as if his body were an inkstick left in the water-holding cavity—the ink well (*mojing* 墨井)—of an ink slab. Su Shi was publicly perceived to have foreordained Pan's fate in poetry, turning the craftsman into something resembling the product of his craft. Whether or not it was in a manner the poet had anticipated, Pan Gu achieved a version of immortality through ink. In this faintly sinister episode, an artisan's apotheosis is reduced to the simple fulfillment of a "poetic omen" (*shichen* 詩讖).¹

Su Shi's curious encounter with Pan Gu prompts reconsideration of the cultural valorization of ink production in middle-period China. I suggest that this seemingly incidental anecdote presages consequential realignments between literature and craft during the Northern Song (960–1127). Su Shi's endorsement of Pan Gu transformed ink production, a basic technology that powered cultures of learning throughout premodern East Asia, into a matter of far-reaching literary concern.² Where earlier poets might have commented on the sensuousness of an inkstick, Su Shi attends to the fabrication of this dark substance in verse. Resisting the passive position of a consumer, Su first identifies with and then comes to impersonate the ink maker's productive body, recasting what had hitherto been an artisanal techne as a legitimate field of scholarly endeavor. This pose was, as the circumstances surrounding Pan Gu's death reveal, predicated on Su's efforts to influence the marketing of ink through poetry and new strategies of inscription.

Su Shi refers to Pan Gu's ink as a "poetic tool" (*shixie* 詩械), a kenning that foregrounds the constitutive function of desktop implements in poetic self-expression. Through a close reading of Su's relationship to the Ink Immortal, I investigate the motivations behind his unprecedented intellectual engagement with the tools and media of writing, identifying a vision of literary creativity attuned, rather than opposed, to the affordances of technology. Although later critics laud Su as a paragon of naturalness and spontaneity, his nine poems and thirty-five

¹ On this final line as a poetic omen, see Wang Yaoqing's 王堯卿 commentary in Su Shi, *Su Shi shiji hezhu* 蘇軾詩集合注, ed. Feng Yingliu 馮應榴 (1741–1801) et al., 50 *juan* 卷 plus 2 suppl. in 3 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2001), v. 2, j. 24, modern page [hereafter mod-p.] 1220.

² On the cultural history of ink in premodern China, see Herbert Franke, *Kulturgeschichtliches über die chinesische Tusche* (Munich: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1962); Tsuen-hsuei Tsien, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 5, *Chemistry and Chemical Technology*, bk 1: *Paper and Printing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 233–51.

colophons (*tiba* 題跋) on ink—compositions largely dated to his years in political exile (first in Huangzhou 黃州, 1080–1084, then in Lingnan 嶺南, 1094–1100)—elicit a newfound concern with the material contingencies and technical preconditions of literary practice.³ Poets' autonomy, Su came to believe during his experiences of censorship and banishment, depends on defending their custodianship of the basic instruments that make writing possible. Consequently, Su's ink poetry transforms the "material realities" of literature into an aesthetic resource, approaching the mundane "processes that bestow existence on writing" as the "very ground of literary invention."⁴ After Su Shi, an inkstick was no longer simply a tool for the making of literature but a contested subject and substrate of literary art.

The emergence of critical writings about writing tools during the Northern Song provides the context for Su Shi's two-part engagement with ink making. First, Su turned to the enigmatic figure of Pan Gu, using his verse for the Ink Immortal to celebrate the character of the ink maker. The fallout from Pan Gu's death registers Su Shi's ascendancy as a dominant voice in the ink market, his poems shaping the values assigned to writing materials. Second, Su Shi claimed that he took up ink making himself, responding to the deprivations of exile by manufacturing his own supplies. This claim, nevertheless, provokes uncertainties as to whether "making" ink refers to the technical production of soot and glue or to the inscription of an inkstick. Reading these two types of texts together reveals an underlying irony: scholars' embrace of artisanal expertise in the Northern Song was contingent on new attempts to control and manipulate craftsmen—characters like Pan Gu—through writing. Su Shi's verse for the Ink Immortal had lasting impact. Entrepreneurial ink merchants creatively adapted Su's poetry throughout the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1636–1912) dynasties to advertise their wares and advance their own contentious claims to literary authority. Moving from writings about ink to writings on

³ For relevant sources, see Lu Qingbin 盧慶濱 [Andrew Lo], "Su Shi dui mo wenhua de gongxian" 蘇軾對墨文化的貢獻, in *Songdai wenxue yanjiu congkan* 宋代文學研究叢刊 6 (2000): 409–29. On Su Shi's affection for Pan Gu's ink, see Chen Zhiping 陳志平, "Dongpo xiansheng pingsheng weiyong 'Pan mo'" 东坡先生平生惟用「潘墨」, *Wenshi zhishi* 文史知识, no. 9 (2006): 63–66.

⁴ Roger Chartier, *Inscription and Erasure: Literature and Written Culture from the Eleventh to the Eighteenth Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), p. x.

inksticks, I consider how writers from the Song (960–1279) to the late Ming sought, and yet struggled, to grasp in words the shape-shifting properties of this inscrutable thing.

The Literary Lives of Writing Tools

A principal source of inspiration for Su Shi's poetic portrait of Pan Gu can be located in a popular tenth-century anecdote recounting the fate of a brush immortal (*bixian* 筆仙).⁵ This tale anticipates the emergence of a new subgenre of writing about writing utensils in the Northern Song, a corpus of miscellaneous notes attributed to leading literary celebrities that recalibrated the interplay between scholarly and artisanal domains of knowledge.⁶ The purported immortality of the anecdote's eponymous protagonist betrays a preoccupation with the challenge of how to reconcile a longing for durability and a celebration of use (with the implication of destruction). This latter concern—namely, how to discern lasting value within the ephemeral—becomes the central theme of Su Shi's literary ruminations on ink.

"Note on the Brush Immortal of the Later Jin" (1115–1234), later attributed to Su Shi, describes a mysterious man who sets up a peculiar vending machine with buckets and pulleys to sell exquisite brushes from his home. As his shuttling products traverse boundaries between private and public spaces, the nameless brush maker perturbs the rigid social distinctions of the four estates (*simin* 四民) scheme, with a gentleman (*shi* 士) improvising as an entrepreneurial craftsman (*gong* 工):⁷

Su Shi, "A Note on the Brush Immortal of the Later Jin"

At the end of the Later Jin, there was an anonymous fellow from Ruzhou 汝州 and every night he made ten brushes at home. When morning came, he would close the door and string a bamboo bucket, a bit like a water pail,

⁵ On similarities between brush and ink immortals, see Lai Jizhi 來集之, *Tanghu qiaoshu* 倘湖樵書, 12 juan, in vol. 146 of *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* 四庫全書存目叢書, *zibu* 子部 series (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1997), j. 2, mod-p. 101b.

⁶ Yanchuan He, "The Materiality, Style, and Culture of Calligraphy in the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127)" (PhD diss., Boston University, 2013), pp. 211–18.

⁷ On the origins of the four hierarchical estates, see Anthony J. Barbieri-Low, *Artisans in Early Imperial China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), pp. 36–37. The other two estates are farmers (*nong* 農) and merchants (*shang* 商).

through a hole he had drilled in the wall facing the street. If someone placed thirty coins in the bucket, then a brush would pop out. Some used their influence to try to procure a brush but were still unable to. When his stock ran out, he would take the cash, toss it in a pot to buy wine and sing loudly with self-contentment, carrying on like this for some time.

After thirty years or so, he suddenly took off and no one knew where he went. After several decades he was spotted again and his looks were the same as before, so people called him the Brush Immortal.⁸

The tale presents implicit parallels between the brushes and the immortal brush maker. The brushes pop out of a hole unexpectedly and then disappear; so too, this strange brush maker is largely unknown yet repeatedly pops up in uncanny circumstances. It takes thirty coins for one of ten brushes to pop out; the brush maker manufactures brushes for thirty years and then vanishes for decades at a time. These oscillations between presence and absence accentuate both the desirability of the elusive object and the enigmatic aura of its maker, as one feeds into and reinforces the other. Such ambivalence extends to the epithet of the Brush Immortal: Is this an immortal who happened to make brushes or a man whose “transcendence” derived from the fame of his distinctive wares? The eminent Tang scholar Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) developed a parodic style of writing on things with his biography of a brush named Fur Point (Maoying zhuan 毛穎傳), a text that wryly manipulates the physical properties of a specific brush to reflect on the vicissitudes of official service.⁹ The pseudobiography of the aforementioned Later Jin brush immortal offers an ironic inversion of this dynamic, with the strange fate of an anonymous human—and his alluring physiognomy—now serving as an analogy for a coveted artifact.

An early version of “Note on the Brush Immortal” and a likely source for Su Shi’s account was included in Su Yijian’s 蘇易簡 (958–996) *Four Registers of a Scholar’s Studio* (*Wenfang sipu* 文房四譜, 986), a landmark compendium that collects remarks about the quartet of

⁸ Su Shi, “Shu Shijin bixian” 書石晉筆仙, in *Su Shi wenji jiaozhu* 蘇軾文集校注, 73 juan, in vols. 10–20 of *Su Shi quanji jiaozhu* 蘇軾全集校注, ed. Zhang Zhilie 張志烈, Ma Defu 馬德富, and Zhou Yukai 周裕鍇 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 2010) [hereafter SSWJ], v. 19, j. 70, mod-p. 7984.

⁹ Han Yu, *Han Changli wenji jiaozhu* 韓昌黎文集校注, 8 juan plus 2 suppl., annot. Ma Qichang 馬其昶 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), j. 8, mod-p. 566.

brush, paper, inkstone, and inkstick.¹⁰ As woodblock printing transformed scholars' relationship to book culture and the transmission of the written word, authors increasingly vied to reassert their custodianship over the basic tools for handwriting.¹¹ Publications dedicated to the so-called "four treasures of a scholar's studio" (*wenfang sibao* 文房四寶) proliferated in the wake of Su Yijian's collection, with leading writers offering rival assessments of calligraphic paraphernalia.¹²

Su Shi's jottings participated in the expansion of this forum, while deviating from the examples of other Northern Song scholars in an intriguing fashion: unlike Su Yijian, Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072), or Mi Fu 米芾 (1051–1107), Su Shi never authored a full-length study of an implement. His comments are largely confined to his colophons, proceeding from his trials with particular materials. Just as his jottings on paintings or calligraphy scrolls claim a physical connection to the surfaces of the works they name, Su Shi's colophons for writing tools suggest that they were often transcribed on or with the very things they assess: "[He] had given me some left-over ink and I wrote these few characters."¹³ "I snatched it, and *this* is that ink."¹⁴ Such rhetoric fosters a sense of immediacy—as if a reader might vicariously inhabit the body of a calligrapher: viewing, touching, smelling the materials of his art—yet it also promotes a claim to authorship, a sense that Su was devising his own judgments on the basis of personally conducted tests.

In accordance with Su Shi's commitment to recording his trials with choice implements, his colophons became increasingly attuned to the achievements of contemporary manufacturers. Early Song officials from south of the Yangzi prided themselves on transmitting the courtly heritage of the Five Dynasties (902–979) and Ten Kingdoms (907–960)—whether the ink (*mo* 墨) of Li Tinggui 李廷珪 (fl. 950–980), the paper (*zhi* 紙) of Chengxin 澄心 Hall, or the Dragon Tail inkstone (Longwei yan 龍尾硯).¹⁵ Later southern scholars—Ouyang

¹⁰ Su Yijian, *Wenfang sipu* (986), 5 *juan*, in vol. 843 of *Yingyin Wenyuange Siku quanshu* 影印文淵閣四庫全書 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1983) [hereafter, *SKQS*], j. 1, mod-pp. 14b–15a.

¹¹ Susan Cherniack, "Book Culture and Textual Transmission in Sung China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 54.1 (1994): 5–125, doi: 10.2307/2719389.

¹² Dorothy Ko, *The Social Life of Inkstones: Artisans and Scholars in Early Qing China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), pp. 61–62.

¹³ Su Shi, "Shu Lü Xingfu mo dian" 書呂行甫墨顛, in *SSWJ*, v. 19, j. 70, mod-p. 7951.

¹⁴ Su Shi, "Ji duo Luzhi mo" 記奪魯直墨, in *SSWJ*, v. 19, j. 70, mod-p. 7965.

¹⁵ Pak-sheung Ng, "A Regional Cultural Tradition in Song China: 'The Four Treasures

Xiu, Mei Yaochen 梅堯臣 (1002–1060), Cai Xiang 蔡襄 (1012–1067), and Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105)—similarly sought to forge a sense of regional identity and continuity with the past through the promotion of Southern Tang (937–975) implements, efforts that assumed political valence amid factional struggles at court from the Qingli 慶曆 era (1041–1048) onwards.¹⁶

Su Shi intermittently advocated for the merits of Southern Tang writing tools, and yet he departed from other connoisseurs by contesting the preeminent reputations of these materials, slyly promoting otherwise unfamiliar alternatives in the Northern Song marketplace. The poet, for instance, courted controversy by praising the obscure Fujianese Phoenix Beak inkstone (Fengzhou yan 鳳咮硯) over the Dragon Tail, brazenly proclaiming: “Master Su took one look and named it the Phoenix Beak; it leads the Dragon Tail to feel the shame of a bull’s rear.”¹⁷ The Phoenix Beak endorsement nevertheless failed, and Su was eventually forced to apologize to the residents of Wuyuan 婺源, the Dragon Tail’s “home” (in present-day Jiangxi).¹⁸ Su similarly queried the popular fashion of collecting Li Tinggui’s tenth-century ink, claiming that contemporaneous eleventh-century ink makers might rival Li’s wares and critiquing the insubstantiality of fame: this search for the new frames Su’s account of Pan Gu.

The son of an acclaimed ink maker named Li Chao 李超 (fl. 907–936), Li Tinggui was appointed Superintendent of Ink (Mowu guan 墨務官) at the Southern Tang court, his legendary products winning the favor of this short-lived kingdom’s last ruler, Li Yu 李煜 (r. 961–975).¹⁹ Su reflects on the irony that collectors were obsessed with hoarding ink yet refrained from testing it with the brush, musing in one vignette that Shi Changyan’s 石昌言 (995–1057) grave was already covered with trees while his collection of Tinggui ink was left untouched, an observation that inspired the mantra: “If you do not grind ink, ink will

of the Study of the Southern Tang” (‘Nan Tang wenfang sibao’), *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 46 (2016): 57–117.

¹⁶ Yanchiuan He, “Materiality, Style, and Culture of Calligraphy,” p. 201.

¹⁷ Su Shi, “Fengzhou yan ming” 鳳咮硯銘, in SSWJ, v. 12, j. 19, mod-p. 2070.

¹⁸ Lu Qingbin, “Su Shi yu yan wenhua” 蘇軾與硯文化, *Songdai wenxue yanjiu congkan* 宋代文學研究叢刊 8 (2002): 486–7; Zhiyi Yang, *Dialectics of Spontaneity: The Aesthetics and Ethics of Su Shi (1037–1101) in Poetry* (Leiden, Nld.: Brill, 2015), pp. 100–1.

¹⁹ Cai Xiang, “Mo bian” 墨辨, in *Cai Xiang ji* 蔡襄集, 40 juan, ed. Wu Yining 吳以寧 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1996), j. 34, mod-p. 634.

grind you down!”²⁰ Su places a variant of this same slogan—“without men grinding ink, ink grinds them down”—at the center of his earliest poem on ink, a 1078 piece matching Shu Huan’s 舒煥 (*jinshi* 進士 1073) inspection of his collection.²¹ These repeated claims that an inkstick’s true value inhered in its transformation and concomitant destruction inflect the literary conceit of Pan Gu’s shape-shifting body.

Su’s critique of hoarding was, in turn, spurred by his opposition toward the prominent place of ink-cake markings in ink connoisseurship. Documenting a gift from Li Chang 李常 (1027–1090), Su Shi challenged the received wisdom on Tinggui’s ink, by claiming that an unknown Korean product might be comparable in quality:

The stamped inscription reads, “Zhang Ligang” 張力剛. I wonder whether that is the name of the ink maker? He says he obtained it from a Korean envoy. This ink has a fresh luster and is pure. Why should it be inferior to that of Li Tinggui, father [Li Chao] and son?²²

Su presents his own appraisal as a willful misreading of the characters stamped onto the tablet, as if his recognition of the ink’s luster (*guang* 光) and purity arose from his carefree ignorance of its manufacturer’s reputation.

During the Northern Song, there was widespread debate among collectors as to the reliability of Tinggui’s markings: whether variants of the character *gui* 珪 (*gui*, 郅, 圭, 珪) were mistaken transcriptions (*biwu* 筆誤) or the titles of different grades of ink.²³ At the same time, connoisseurs disputed the status of the label “Xi Tinggui” 奚廷珪, unsure if it was a version of Li’s earlier name or the name of another ink maker altogether.²⁴ He Wei (1077–1145) bemoaned such tenuous connections between a product label and the provenance of a product, claiming that contemporaneous ink makers—including Shen Gui

²⁰ 子不磨墨，墨當磨子；Su Shi, “Shu Shi Changyan ai mo” 書石昌言愛墨, in *SSWJ*, v. 19, j. 70, mod-p. 7955. On the popularity of Su’s maxim, see He Wei 何蘧, “Momo ren” 墨磨人, in *Chunzhu jiwen* 春渚紀聞, 10 *juan*, ed. Zhang Minghua 張明華 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), j. 8, mod-p. 129.

²¹ 非人磨墨墨磨人；Su Shi, “Ciyun da Shu jiaoshou guan yu suocang mo” 次韻答舒教授觀余所藏墨, in *Su Shi shiji jiaozhu* 蘇軾詩集校注, 50 *juan*, in vols. 1–8 of *Su Shi quanji jiaozhu*, v. 3, j. 16, mod-p. 1748.

²² Su Shi, “Shu Li Gongze hui mo” 書李公擇惠墨, in *SSWJ*, v. 19, j. 70, mod-p. 7948.

²³ Wang Qinchen 王欽臣, *Wangshi tanlu* 王氏談錄, 1 *juan*, in vol. 862 of *SKQS*, mod-pp. 581–82. Cf. Pak-sheung Ng, “Regional Cultural Tradition,” p. 92.

²⁴ Li Xiaomei 李孝美, *Mopu fashi* 墨譜法式, 3 *juan*, in vol. 843 of *SKQS*, j. 2, mod-p. 635; Lu You 陸友, *Moshi* 墨史, 3 *juan*, in vol. 843 of *SKQS*, j. 1, mod-p. 658.

沈珪 who took his name from Li Tinggui—no longer manufactured soot or glue, but simply purchased supplies and stamped them with their labels (*yinhao* 印號).²⁵

The earliest illustrated compendium of inksticks, Li Xiaomei's (n.d.) *Catalog of Ink Designs* (*Mopu fashi*, 1095), attempted to fix the correct inscriptions for leading ink makers from the Tang (618–907) through the eleventh century with captioned images that instruct the viewer in how to assess ink markings and hence *read* the artifact. Li Xiaomei hoped to counteract a proliferation of counterfeits, yet the format of his compendium encouraged a shift in attention toward the surface of an inkstick, providing accessible templates for further reproduction.

For Su Shi, the fashion of preserving ink and the semiotic instabilities of ink-cake markings constituted two sides of the same problem: as consumers became preoccupied with the acquisition of labels, names appeared to float free of things, shedding ties to the details of discrete recipes or techniques. Advancing a two-part critique of collecting practices—a rejection of hoarding and a refutation of the spurious value invested in artisanal inscriptions—Su Shi sought to propound his own hierarchy of contemporaneous ink makers, a search that led to Pan Gu. The related challenges of how to endorse the properties of an inkstick while recommending its destruction, or how to decisively influence and yet transcend the mechanisms of the market, prompted Su to revivify the literary figure of the immortal.

Portraying the Ink Maker

Across his colophons, Su Shi repeatedly invokes Pan Gu's name as a byword for the highest achievements in manufacturing, carefully documenting the details of the artisan's bespoke commissions.²⁶ Indeed, what we know of Pan today is derived almost entirely from Su and the writings of his followers—the “scholars at Su's Gate” (Sumen xueshi 蘇門學士).²⁷ Su found in Pan's ink a means of reckoning with the material constraints of exile, an impetus for reconceptualizing the matter of poets' autonomy. His literary concern for the public promotion

²⁵ He Wei, “Maiyan yinhao” 買煙印號, in *Chunzhu jiwen*, j. 8, mod-p. 124.

²⁶ Su Shi, “Shu Pei Yan mo” 書裴言墨, in *SSWJ*, v. 19, j. 70, mod-p. 7973.

²⁷ See Huang Tingjian, *Shangu ji* 山谷集, 97 *juan*, vol. 1113 of *SKQS*, j. 28, mod-p. 299.

of Pan's name, encapsulated in the poetic omen of 1084, concurrently assumes a partially self-centered marketing function.

In his sole record of an inscribed Pan Gu ink cake, Su Shi introduces the ink maker as a supplier for renowned academicians—notably Feng Jing 馮京 (*zi* 字 [courtesy name] Dangshi 當世; 1021–1094), who was a stubborn opponent of Su's political adversary Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086), the leader of the reform faction that Su and his allies struggled to thwart in the late eleventh century:

Su Shi, "Written with Feng Dangshi's Ink"

When Feng Dangshi was appointed to the West Palace (Xifu 西府), he sent an order to Pan Gu to make ink. It was inscribed, "Eastern Gallery of the Bureau Hall" (Shuting dongge 樞庭東閣). It is *this* ink. Ruan Fu 阮孚 [278–362] once said, "How many pairs of clogs will I get through in my life?" I, however, should say, "Who knows how many pellets of ink you might use!" How often people complain that they cannot grind their ink! Instead, they are ground down by their ink.²⁸

The ink cake's inscription, "Eastern Gallery of the Bureau Hall," links Pan's labor to the spatial setting of Feng's resistance to Wang Anshi's political agenda in the Bureau of Military Affairs (Shumi fu 樞密府). An allusion to Gongsun Hong's 公孫弘 (200–121 BCE) "Eastern Gallery" ("Dongge" 東閣) meanwhile designates a site where talented officials might congregate to discuss strategy, reminding the ink cake's owner of the importance of cultivating solidarity.²⁹ Su's trial with Feng's personal stock, a custom-made souvenir for a defiant scholar rather than branded merchandise, documents his relationship with an ally in the political struggles at court that ultimately precipitated his own exile to Huangzhou (1080–1084), when he would eulogize Pan as the Ink Immortal.³⁰ Pan's ink consequently became a proxy for Su's reflections on the repercussions of internecine factional strife.

As one of the only surviving descriptions of a Pan Gu ink cake from the Northern Song, Su's colophon inspired later ink makers to

²⁸ Su Shi, "Shu Feng Dangshi mo" 書馮當世墨, in *SSWJ*, v. 19, j. 70, mod-p. 7960.

²⁹ *Hanshu buzhu* 漢書補注, ed. Wang Xianqian 王先謙, 100 *juan* plus suppl. in 3 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2008), v. 2, j. 58, mod-p. 548.

³⁰ Feng Jing recommended Su Shi for a position in the Bureau of Drafting Officials (Sheren yuan 舍人院) in 1071; "Feng Jing," in *Songshi* 宋史, ed. Tuo Ketuo 托克托 et al., 496 *juan*, vols. 280–288 of *SKQS*, j. 379, mod-p. 206.



FIG. 1 Pan Gu's Ink Cake, Commissioned by Feng Jing. This seventeenth-century illustration of the eleventh-century ink cake is based on Su Shi's colophon, "Written with Feng Dangshi's Ink." Su Shi's only description of an inscribed Pan Gu ink cake provides the object's title Eastern Gallery of the Bureau Hall (Shuting dongge 樞庭東閣; top) and implies the maker's mark, Pan Gu Ink (Pan Gu mo 潘谷墨; bottom). The motif of dragons chasing a flaming pearl is a later embellishment. Source: Fang Ruisheng 方瑞生, "Gumo shu xia" 古墨東下, in *Mohai tu* 墨海圖, ed. Fang Ruisheng, 7 juan, in vols. 3–8 of *Sheyuan mocui* 涉園墨萃, ed. Tao Xiang 陶湘 (Beijing: Wujin taoshi, 1929), v. 5, j. 2, p. 7a. Image courtesy of Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

imagine its visual appearance, framing the inscription with two sinuous dragons competing over a flaming pearl (fig. 1), an archaizing motif in ink-cake design that invokes the insignia of the imperial court, the acquisition of propitious treasure, and the prospect of unrestricted transformation. And yet, as with “Zhang Ligang,” the mark for Su is worth mentioning only in the moment of its destruction; its significance is predicated on its disavowal.

Pan Gu emerges from Su Shi’s colophons as an exemplary ink maker, a figure who transcends the improprieties of the market—one whose name properly attests to his substance. It was in poetry, however, that Su drafted his most considered defense of Pan’s craft. Poets had composed lines of verse to commemorate gifts of ink, yet there were no precedents for addressing an ink maker as the titular subject of a poem. Su confessed that he never met the artisan and so his eulogy (“Zeng Pan Gu” 贈潘谷) can be read as an extrapolation from the anthropomorphic virtues of ink. In Su’s poem, as in “Note on the Brush Immortal,” the artisan emerges as a personification of his product. Su Shi sets out to praise the ink maker’s integrity, yet his composition can also be read as a poem about poets: a critique of literary celebrity from the perspective of those who labor with their “smeared” and “cracked” hands.

蘇軾，贈潘谷

Su Shi, “For Pan Gu”

潘郎曉踏河陽春， When young Pan [Yue] wandered one morning
in the Heyang spring,
明珠白璧驚市人。 He startled the market crowd like gleaming
pearls or a white jade disc.
那知望拜馬蹄下， How do you know he bowed after the
trampling horse’s hooves?
胸中一斛泥與塵。 In his chest, he had a whole bushel of dirt and
dust.
何似墨潘穿破褐， How does this compare with the ink maker Pan
[Gu], who wears tattered kersey?
瑯瑯翠餅敲玄笏。 The bluish cakes clink clearly as they knock the
black tablet.
布衫漆黑手如龜， His linen shirt is smeared a pitch black, and his
hands resemble cracked turtle shells,

未害冰壺貯秋月。But it has still not scarred this ice pot that holds
the autumn moon.

世人重耳輕目前，Common people only value hearsay and belittle
what they see before their own eyes.

區區張李爭嬋妍。How trifling that Zhang [Yu]³¹ and Li
[Tinggui] vied for elegance!

一朝入海尋李白，One morning, Pan will enter the seas in the
footsteps of Li Bai;

空看人間畫墨仙。In vain, I search for anyone who has painted the
Ink Immortal!³²

At the heart of Su Shi's poem lies a chiasitic inversion whereby a poet's character is reduced to a counterfeit commodity, while ink becomes a metaphor for human integrity. The poem opens with a contrast between Pan Yue 潘岳 (247–300), a celebrated Jin rhapsodist, and the artisan Pan Gu, both of whose appearances obscure their intrinsic worth. Planting peach and pear trees while stationed in Heyang, Pan Yue was renowned for his dazzling looks—figured here as trinkets in a shop—yet inside, he was clogged with dirt, a reference to his sycophantic prostrations in the dust trails of an imperial consort's carriage.³³ Pan Gu, meanwhile, despite his cracked skin and the detritus on his tattered clothes, maintains an untrammelled dignity through the practice of his “clinking” craft.

Su Shi is particularly drawn to points of contact between the artisanal body and the messy materials the craftsman works with (cracked skin, scars, smears, stains), details that register a metonymic displacement of producer into product. Having relegated a jade disc to dust and dirt, Su raises Pan's bluish black tablets of ink to the status of an ice pot—a kenning for the glow of the moon, drawn from Du Fu's 杜甫 (712–770) “Pot of Ice, the Jade Yoke, hung in clear autumn.”³⁴ Inverting

³¹ On pairing Pan Gu and Zhang Yu, see Su Shi, “Shu Zhang Yu Pan Gu mo” 書張遇潘谷墨, in *SSWJ*, v. 19, j. 70, mod-p. 7950.

³² Su Shi, “Zeng Pan Gu” 贈潘谷, in *Su Shi shiji jiaozhu*, v. 4, j. 24, mod-p. 2673.

³³ “Pan Yue,” in *Jinshu* 晉書, ed. Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 et al., 130 *juan*, vols. 255–56 of *SKQS*, j. 55, mod-p. 913.

³⁴ (The Jade Yoke alludes to a constellation.) Du Fu, “Ji Pei Shizhou yi shou” 寄裴施州一首, in *Du shi Zhao Cigong xianhou jieji jiao* 杜詩趙次公先後解輯校, ed. Lin Jizhong 林繼中, 3 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012), v. 3, j. 11, mod-pp. 1219–1220. For the translation, see Stephen Owen, trans. *The Poetry of Du Fu*, ed. Stephen Owen, Paul W. Kroll, and Ding Xiang Warner, 6 vols. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), v. 5, p. 326–27, no. 20.100.

the associations of dirtiness and purity, darkness and light, Su's adaptation of Du Fu's ambient ice pot works to illumine the delicate beauty in humble, or outwardly disfigured, things.

These slippages between reputation and substance frame the poet's own act of naming. In the concluding couplet, Su Shi turns to another Du Fu poem, in which Du Fu recounts Kong Chaofu's 孔巢父 (d. 794) ocean journey to the land of the immortals. Su Shi takes Du Fu's first line, "[Kong] Chaofu tosses his head, he is unwilling to stay; he intends to go east to the sea, seeking mist and fog," and his final line, "In the south if you visit the Cave of Yu and meet Li Bai, say that Du Fu asked after him and wonders how he is now," and fuses them.³⁵ Pan takes the place of Kong, traveling through "mist and fog"—lingering traces of calligraphic ink play—to search for Li Bai, the "Banished Immortal" (Zhhexian 謫仙) or the "Poet Immortal" (Shixian 詩仙). In this final image of the Ink Immortal—a reference to both a painting of Pan Gu and the superlative ink with which such a picture might have been painted—the ink maker surpasses the posturing word-smith, attaining transcendence in the manner of Li Bai. In keeping with Su Shi's desire to grind down and use up his ink, Pan's "immortality" depends upon his corporeal disappearance. Su's allusions to Li Bai, one of the few earlier writers to have eulogized inksticks in poetry, not only flatter Pan Gu, but work to sanction a lineage of poets writing about the substance.³⁶ The speaker, in this sense, can be said to vicariously participate in the pursuit of Li that his final lines of verse recite.

Su Shi returned to the figure of the Ink Immortal one year later in the first of a series of four poems recording a gift from the collector Sun Jue 孫覺 (zi Xinlao 莘老; 1028–1090). The poet begins by noting the scarcity of Pan's Korean ingredients, before praising his superior binding agent and the firmness of his patterned tablets. Midway through the poem, Su imagines Pan's ink being brought to Penglai 蓬萊, the palace of the immortals:

³⁵ Owen, *Poetry of Du Fu*, v. 1, p. 35, no. 1.29; Du Fu, "Song Kong Chaofu xie bing gui-you jiangdong jiancheng Li Bai" 送孔巢父謝病歸遊江東兼呈李白, in *Du shi Zhao Cigong xianhou jieji jiao*, v. 1, j. 2, pp. 34–35.

³⁶ Li Bai, "Chou Zhang Sima zeng mo" 酬張司馬贈墨, in *Li Bai quanji biannian jian-zhu* 李白全集編年箋注, ed. An Qi 安旗 et al., 4 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015), v. 2, j. 8, mod-p. 771.

蘇軾，孫莘老寄墨，首一

Su Shi, "Sun Xinlao Sends Ink, No. 1"

徂徠無老松， On Mount Culai there are no more old pines,³⁷
 易水無良工。 And in Yishui there are no talented artisans.³⁸
 珍材取樂浪， Precious materials have to be fetched from Lelang;³⁹
 妙手惟潘翁。 Old Pan is the only ingenious master.
 魚胞熟萬杵， Fish glue has been prepared from ten thousand
 pestle strokes:
 犀角盤雙龍。 [As hard as] a rhinoceros horn wrapped with a pair
 of dragons.
 墨成不敢用， When the ink is completed, you dare not use it,
 進入蓬萊宮。 But bring it to the Penglai Palace.
 蓬萊春晝永， In Penglai, the spring daylight lasts for eternity,
 玉殿明房櫺。 As light breaks through the window bars of the jade halls.
 金箋灑飛白， Golden paper, flecked with Flying White⁴⁰—
 瑞霧縈長虹。 A great rainbow entwined with auspicious clouds.
 遙憐醉常侍， Pity the drunken councilor,
 一笑開天容。 Who brought laughter to the Heavenly countenance.⁴¹

³⁷ Mount Culai in Shandong was praised for its pine trees because they were mentioned in Ode 300 of the *Shijing* 詩經; Chao Guanzhi 晁貫之, *Mojing* 墨經, 1 *juan*, in vol. 843 of *SKQS*, mod-p. 649. Cf. "Bi gong" 闕宮 [Mao no. 300], in *Fushiyin Maoshi zhushu* 附釋音毛詩注疏, annot. Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, in vol. 68 of *Chongkan Songben Shisanjing zhushu fu jiaokan ji* 重刊宋本十三經注疏附校勘記, ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 and Lu Xuanxun 盧宣旬 (Nanchang: Nanchang fuxue, 1815), j. 20B, p. 783a, available online at Scripta Sinica 漢籍電子文獻資料庫, <http://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw>, s.v. 徂徠山.

³⁸ Zu Min 祖敏 (n.d.), a Tang ink superintendent and the first professional ink maker with a recorded name, was from Yiding 易定. Given his fame, many ink cakes subsequently bore "Yishui" 易水 on the surface; Lu You, *Moshi*, j. 1, mod-p. 658.

³⁹ Lelang was a Han-dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) commandery on the Korean peninsula.

⁴⁰ "Flying White" is the name of a calligrapher's technique, attributed to Cai Yong 蔡邕 (132–192) who was allegedly inspired by watching a street cleaner at work. Emperor Renzong 仁宗 (1010–1063) was fond of this technique, which uses a partially inked brush to create white streaks in the strokes; Su Shi, "Renzong Huangdi yu feibai ji" 仁宗皇帝御飛白記, in *SSWJ*, v. 11, j. 11, mod-pp. 1067–71.

⁴¹ Su Shi, "Sun Xinlao ji mo sishou" 孫莘老寄墨四首, in *Su Shi shiji jiaozhu*, v. 4, j. 24, mod-p. 2755.

The “immortality” of Pan’s ink is realized through its use and enjoyment by a divine sovereign in the environs of a celestial studio. Su’s allusion to Tang Taizong’s 唐太宗 (r. 626–649) forgiving laughter at the drunken transgressions of Liu Ji 劉洎 (d. 646)—a councilor compared to a haughty concubine for daring to take a sample of the emperor’s own Flying White calligraphy from the imperial seat at a banquet—gains further significance given the date of the poem, written upon the conclusion of Su’s five years in exile in Huangzhou.⁴²

Su Shi’s final poem in the quartet ties his initial praise for Pan’s ink to the newfound freedoms afforded by Sun Jue’s gift of Ink Immortal tablets. The opening couplet reflects on the *Crow Terrace Poetry* case (Wutaishi an 烏臺詩案) of 1079, a literary inquisition intended to frame Su Shi for his poetic criticism of Wang Anshi’s reformist agenda and the pretext for his subsequent banishment from court.⁴³

蘇軾，孫莘老寄墨，首四

Su Shi, “Sun Xinlao Sends Ink, No. 4”

吾窮本坐詩， I have been exhaustively investigated for my poems;

久服朋友戒。 For a while, I took my friends’ warnings to heart.

五年江湖上， For five years, I stayed among the rivers and lakes,

閉口洗殘債。 Held my tongue and washed away my debts.

今來復稍稍， Recently things have gradually improved,

快癢如爬疥。 An itching delight like scratching a scab.

先生不譏訶， You have not only mocked me

又復寄詩械。 But have sent me this poetic tool

幽光發奇思， Whose dark glow emits extraordinary thoughts,

⁴² “Liu Ji,” in *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書, ed. Liu Xu 劉昫 et al., 200 *juan*, vols. 268–71 of SKQS, j. 74, mod-p. 703.

⁴³ Charles Hartman, “Poetry and Politics in 1079: The Crow Terrace Poetry Case of Su Shih,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 12 (1990): 15–44; Uchiyama Seiya 內山精也, *Chuanmei yu zhenxiang: Su Shi jiqi zhouwei shidafu de wenxue* 傳媒與真相：蘇軾及其周圍士大夫的文學, trans. Zhu Gang 朱剛 et al. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2005), pp. 140–292.

點黥出荒怪。 Each black drop evoking a strange wonder.

詩成一自笑, The poem is done; I have to laugh at myself

故疾逢蝦蟹。 Because my former affliction has met with shrimp
and crabs.⁴⁴

Su Shi's sequence yokes his affection for Pan's ink to his own release from punishment, his desire to "scratch his itch" and write poetry freely: exile is framed as a state of deprived access and heightened sensitivity to the sensuous properties of writing materials. Latent associations between Pan Gu's ink and Su's political frustrations, intimated in his initial colophon of support for Feng Jing, emerge more clearly in these lines of verse. If the first poem in the series ends with an emperor's forgiving laugh, the final poem concludes with Su Shi's own mischievous smirk, his realization that he can play with his black tablets once more, ending his years of self-censorship, possibly courting future controversies.

Ink is portrayed as the precondition of poetic self-expression, a role encapsulated in Su's resonant kenning of the "poetic tool" or the motif of a "dark glow" that generates "extraordinary thoughts." Written within a year of each other and linked through the figure of the Ink Immortal, Su Shi's endorsement of Pan Gu (1084) and his sequence on Sun Jue's gift (1085) repurpose the topos of ink to question the extent and basis of a poet's autonomy: Su's veneration of the ink maker's diligence—with its implicit critique of a poet's pretensions—is inflected by an irreverent longing to write without restrictions.

The epithet of the Ink Immortal transformed Pan Gu's reputation and framed accounts of his death. In the wake of Su Shi's ink poems, a story circulated that told of Pan's drunken fall into a well in an unwitting reenactment of Li Bai's legendary death from drowning. A version of this anecdote, later attributed to Su Shi, emphasizes how it accorded with the name Su had bestowed upon the ink maker. After reiterating that Pan "was not a person of the market," because he gave away ink with no concern for money, Su charts the transformative impact of his own endorsement:

⁴⁴ Su Shi, "Sun Xinlao ji mo sishou," v. 4, j. 24, p. 2760. The consumption of crabs could lead to an itchy rash, the sense of the line is that Su's former sufferings might get worse due to this gift of ink.

I once gave a poem to him that read: "One morning, Pan will enter the seas in the footsteps of Li Bai, In vain I search for anyone who has painted the Ink Immortal!"

One day, he suddenly burned his promissory notes and began a three-day binge, before wildly rushing off to a well where he died. When people peered down into the well, they saw him crouched at the bottom, clutching a string of prayer beads in his hand.⁴⁵

Subsequent versions of the same story affirm how the trope of the Ink Immortal was materialized through Pan Gu's metamorphosis, in a process that mimics the disintegration of an inkstick in the dry "well" of an inkstone. The literary concept of *xian* 仙 (immortality) signifies more than simply "not dying." Rather, it evokes a transformation in an individual's mode of being from a common human state to a "purified and sublimated" form closer to the nature of the Way (Dao 道).⁴⁶ In retellings of this episode, Pan's attainment of such a state replicates the consumption of his products:

Later it was said that [Pan] Gu was drinking on the outskirts of the town and didn't return home for several days. His family members searched for him and found that he had died sitting in a dried-up well. His body was flaccid, and they suspected that he had transformed.

Master Dongpo [Su Shi] once sent a poem to him with the couplet, "One morning, Pan will enter the seas in the footsteps of Li Bai, In vain I search for anyone who has painted the Ink Immortal!"

It is likely Su's saying means Pan was an ink recluse.⁴⁷

Pan's disintegration confirms the legitimacy of Su Shi's judgment: the artisan follows Li Bai, fulfilling the terms of the poet's prophecy. An aesthetic fascination with the power of a Pan Gu inkstick even after its "body" was ground down resurfaces in the judgments of other connoisseurs: "fragrance pervades its flesh and bones, even when it has been ground down in an inkstone, this fragrance lingers on."⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Su Shi, "Shu Pan Gu mo" 書潘谷墨, in *SSWJ*, v. 19, j. 70, mod-p. 7971.

⁴⁶ Zornica Kirkova, *Roaming into the Beyond: Representations of Xian Immortality in Early Medieval Chinese Verse* (Leiden, Nld.: Brill, 2016), pp. 14–15.

⁴⁷ He Wei, "Pan Gu Moxian chuainang zhi mo" 潘谷墨仙揣囊知墨, in *Chunzhu jiwen*, j. 8, mod-p. 122.

⁴⁸ 香徹肌骨，磨研至盡而香不衰；Chen Shidao 陳師道, *Houshan ji* 後山集, 24 juan, in vol. 1114 of *SKQS*, j. 18, mod-p. 693.

The scene of Pan's disappearance, with the reclusive artisan burning his promissory notes or clutching prayer beads, dramatizes a symbolic withdrawal from the market. The ink maker's dissolution reads as an allegory for the decommmodification of his ink. This "diversion" from the commodity phase predictably resulted in an enhancement of value.⁴⁹ Su Shi acknowledges that his poetic omen was self-serving, raising the price of Pan's ink cakes in his own collection, in a note to Wang Yuxi 王禹錫 (n. d.) that accompanies a gift of eight pellets of Pan's ink. Su shrewdly reminds his associate that the worth of this selection has increased since the artisan's death: "Pan Gu was an esteemed manufacturer. Since he passed away you can no longer obtain his ink, so you should really treasure these specimens."⁵⁰

If Su Shi profited from writing Pan into immortality, his endorsement of Pan's ink also had a considerable impact on the wider ink market.⁵¹ The Ink Immortal resurfaces in a number of Northern Song poems, suggesting that tales of Pan's legendary death served to advertise the value of his products among collectors. Zou Hao 鄒浩 (1060–1111), for instance, takes the conceit of Pan Gu as an immortal even further by suggesting that the adept Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓 (b. 796) instructed the ink maker in the techniques of inner alchemy:⁵²

潘谷賣墨時， In the times when Pan Gu was selling his ink,
 呂翁嘗過之。 Old Lü once passed by;
 指授長生訣， He taught Pan the formula for lengthening life.
 舉世那能窺。 Could anyone spot him?
 但稱衆墨中， Yet in evaluating ink cakes,
 谷墨最珍奇。 Pan Gu's products are by far the most precious.
 一旦內藥成， One morning, his "inner cure" complete;

⁴⁹ Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 28.

⁵⁰ Su Shi, "Shu Zhang Yu Pan Gu mo," v. 19, j. 70, mod-p. 7950.

⁵¹ One of the few records of Pan not authored by Su Shi suggests that Pan's products were sold in the Kaifeng temple markets; Meng Yuanlao 孟元老, *Dongjing menghua lu* 東京夢華錄, 10 *juan*, in vol. 589 of SKQS, j. 3, mod-p. 138.

⁵² See also Chen Zhiping, "Dongpo xiansheng," p. 65.

解去逃喧卑。He took off, unbound, from the clamor of the
mundane world.⁵³

He Zhu 賀鑄 (1052–1125) similarly turns to the tale of the Ink Immortal to promote Pan's wares in an eighteen-line poem, dated to 1090, to cover a present for the eminent official Yang Shi 楊時 (1053–1135).⁵⁴ He's imagery resonates with the praise for Pan's ink in the first of Su Shi's earlier set of four poems. The first line of both pieces begin with references to the state of the forests on Mount Culai: "On Mount Culai there are no more old pines" (Su); "Snow sets heavily on Mount Culai, hoary pine trees topple to the ground" 徂來雪壓蒼松顛 (He). He Zhu's description of Pan's glue making process—"Glue from the ocean refined nine times is fit for repairing strings to sound; with the force of ten thousand pestle strokes, the mortar pounding is nearly through" 海膠九煉堪續弦, 力搗萬杵臼欲穿—similarly expands upon Su Shi's line: "Fish glue has been prepared from ten thousand pestle strokes."⁵⁵ Midway through the poem, He Zhu fully embraces Su's image of Old Pan (Pan weng 潘翁) in the process of becoming an immortal:

陳台潘谷老且賢, Pan Gu of the Chen Pavilion was wise in his
old age;

授唯識者不計錢。He only gave gifts to connoisseurs, without
calculating a price.

是翁解化如蛻蟬, The old man found release from life, like a
cicada from its pupa;

後可繼此無聞焉。I have not heard of who can continue his work
from here on out.

付君一圭款識全, I entrust to you one tablet, complete with a
marking.

保護謹密何千年。If you protect it and keep it hidden, it will last
for thousands of years.⁵⁶

⁵³ Zou Hao, "Meng chenhui Pan Gu mo" 夢臣惠潘谷墨, in *Daoxiang ji* 道鄉集, 40 juan in 2 vols. (Taipei: Hanhua wenhua shiye gongsi, 1970), v. 1, j. 5, mod-p. 159.

⁵⁴ Stuart Howard Sargent, *The Poetry of He Zhu (1052-1125): Genres, Contexts, and Creativity* (Leiden, Nld.: Brill, 2007), pp. 157–58.

⁵⁵ My translations of He Zhu's poem follow Sargent with minor changes; Sargent, *Poetry of He Zhu*, p. 158.

⁵⁶ He Zhu, *Qinghu yilao shiji* 慶湖遺老詩集, 9 juan plus suppl., in *Kangfan shiji*; *Qinghu*

In He Zhu's poem, the mark on the inkstick is noted in passing not for what it says but for its physical condition, the sheer fact that it remains intact. The value of the ink lies not in its utility—a point that would have frustrated Su Shi—but in the quiddity of this mark, the presence of which merits protection and storage. The label remains silent and devoid of any denotative meaning, and yet it is animated by the preceding image of Pan Gu—Su Shi's personification of a pure-gift—as he “sheds” his corporeal form. The literary spectacle of Pan's disappearance ironically serves to justify the preservation of an ink maker's inscription: ink poetry had come to participate in the public promotion of a product label.

Becoming an Ink Maker

In 1094, with the empowerment of the seventeen-year-old Emperor Zhezong 哲宗 (r. 1085–1100) and the resurgence of the reform faction at court, Su Shi was once more exiled as a political dissident: first to Huizhou 惠州 (Guangdong; 1094–1097) and then to the remote southern island of Hainan 海南 (1097–1100). The deprivations of exile, as Ronald Egan demonstrates, proved to be a direct challenge to Su Shi's “moral fortitude and self-sufficiency,” yet they also created a space for the exploration of “new kinds of conduct and self-identities”—providing the former official with more leisure time, while removing the pressures of adhering to a “single dominant orientation” in life.⁵⁷

Famed for his studies of physiological alchemy, Su Shi also used his time in Hainan to experiment with making ink. Su's ink poems from the 1080s sought to advance the prestige of ink making and critically reflect on a poet's autonomy. In exile during the 1090s, Su returned to these two leitmotifs, bringing them together by assuming for himself aspects of the role he had initially sketched for Pan Gu. Reading Su Shi's poetry from the 1080s in light of his writings from Hainan reframes the literary spectacle of the artisan's death as a portent of the scholar's subsequent self-reinvention. Su's efforts to become an ink maker, rather than creating a smooth transition from the domain of writing to craft, brought to the fore concerns with product labeling that lay behind the

yilao shiji 康範詩集; 慶湖遺老詩集, vols. 155–56 of *Siku quanshu zhenben ba ji* 四庫全書真本八集 (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshuguan, 1978), v. 156, j. 1, pp. 9b–10a.

⁵⁷ Ronald C. Egan, *Word, Image, and Deed in the Life of Su Shi* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, and Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1994), p. 220.

Ink Immortal poems, prompting later readers to reassess the matter of inscription. What ultimately constitutes ink making: mixing carbon residue with glue or signing solid tablets?

For Su Shi, Pan Gu's wares not only surpassed those of his contemporaries, his ingredients could be used as additives to improve the luster of other products: "Korean ink," Su writes, "is extraordinarily black yet dull, and it is only by mixing it with Pan Gu's ink that it becomes first-class," a sentiment reiterated in a later colophon from 1080.⁵⁸ Praising the strength of Pan's glue recipe, Su disturbs bifurcations between consumer and producer, as the testing of ink gave way to acts of experimentation: the scholar recycled Pan's materials to fabricate his own concoctions. Writing from Kaifeng in 1087, Su reveals that during his exile in Huangzhou he had also tested his own blend of ink by mixing together twenty-six pellets, a gift from Wang Shen 王誥 (1036–1093), naming the batch Snow Hall Ink (Xuetang yi mo 雪堂義墨) after his studio from this period.⁵⁹ Grinding Pan's ink consequently motivated Su's advocacy for an alternative model of connoisseurship: breaking apart and personally blending samples of black pine soot and fish-maw adhesive.

Two of Su Shi's colophons from the 1090s document his efforts to gather soot by burning local pinewood in his kitchen. If Su's previous notes record trials with the products of other ink makers, in these two comments, he reports the results of his own amateur endeavors:

"Written with Hainan Ink"

I made this ink myself in Hainan, and it can be deemed comparable to that of Tinggui. The pine trees in Hainan are plentiful, so there is an abundance of pine soot. Because there is plenty of soot, I can make the best selections.⁶⁰

"A Record of Making Ink in Hainan"

On the twenty-third day of the twelfth lunar month of the *jimao* 己卯 [1099] year, a fire broke out from the ink in my stove and almost destroyed my lodgings. After the fire was extinguished, I ceased making ink cakes.

⁵⁸ Su Shi, "Shu Wang Junzuo suo xu mo" 書王君佐所蓄墨, in *SSWJ*, v. 19, j. 70, mod-p. 7974. A similar statement appears in Su's colophon from 1080, "Shu bie zao Gaoli mo" 書別造高麗墨, in *SSWJ*, v. 19, j. 70, mod-p. 7959. See the comments on Pan's glue in Chao Guanzhi, *Mojing*, mod-p. 650.

⁵⁹ Su Shi, "Shu Xuetang yi mo" 書雪堂義墨, in *SSWJ*, v. 19, j. 70, mod-p. 7963.

⁶⁰ Su Shi, "Shu Hainan mo" 書海南墨, in *SSWJ*, v. 19, j. 70, mod-p. 7976.

I had manufactured five hundred fine ink pellets of different sizes, and among these, several hundred approached the quality of lacquer. I now have enough ink for a lifetime. I could leave some for others, but I do not know whom. I still have a cartload of pine-resin strips to keep my light burning at night. I finished this note on the second drum beat [around 10 p.m.] of the twenty-eighth day.⁶¹

Posing as a novice making supplies for his own use, Su flaunts an accident-prone demeanor. Again, these writings reveal a preoccupation with, yet simultaneous disavowal of, any concern with fame. Su claims that his ink cakes are so comparable to Tinggui's that he could present them as gifts to others and no one would know who had made them—suggesting that he was capable of outdoing other craftsmen with more established reputations, while reminding his reader that he held no attachments to these forms of recognition.

In light of Su's straitened circumstances in Hainan, writing implements again assumed heightened significance as synecdoches for the writer's suspended agency. Su Shi's brother Su Zhe 蘇轍 (1039–1112) advised him to destroy his inkstones.⁶² The poet consequently evoked his curtailed conditions in images of disintegrating brushes.⁶³ It is against this backdrop that Su's claims to have made "enough ink for a lifetime" assume added pathos. There is, Su wistfully insinuates, temporary freedom to be gained through emulating the ink maker's industriousness—making the things that might yet render writing a possibility. Befitting Su Shi's preoccupation with the trope of disappearance, reports suggest that on his return from Hainan to Guangzhou, Su's vessel capsized and he lost four chests of his own ink in addition to one Tinggui tablet and his two remaining pellets of Pan Gu ink.⁶⁴

Su Shi's poetic veneration of Pan Gu's craft was inflected by his investments in collecting and promoting the value of ink cakes bearing Pan's markings. Su's self-serving experiments in Hainan similarly disguise a more complicated story of co-opting artisanal labor through

⁶¹ Su Shi, "Ji Hainan zuo mo" 記海南作墨, in *SSWJ*, v. 19, j. 70, mod-p. 7976.

⁶² Su Shi, "Yu Cheng Zhengfu qishiyou shou: Shiliu" 與程正輔七十一首: 十六, in *SSWJ*, v. 17, j. 54, mod-pp. 5968–69.

⁶³ Su Shi, "Shu Tang Linfu hui Zhuge bi" 書唐林夫惠諸葛筆, in *SSWJ*, v. 19, j. 70, mod-p. 7993.

⁶⁴ Lu You 陸游, *Laoxue'an biji* 老學庵筆記, 10 *juan*, ed. Li Jianxiong 李劍雄 and Liu Dequan 劉德權 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), j. 5, mod-p. 66.

inscription. Su Shi's experiments in Hainan constituted a model for the scholar-ink maker—a new role type that served to justify literati engagement in craft. It was now possible for a scholar to openly pose as an artisan provided that he adhered to the ideals of a craftsman like Pan Gu: self-reliance and a carefree repudiation of money. Given Su Shi's age and ill-health, however, questions persist as to whether he actually sifted soot or stewed glue himself.

As Andrew Lo notes, the problem of deciding what references to scholars making ink mean is compounded by the fact that much of the documentary evidence for Northern Song literati ink comes from Su Shi's colophons. Su mentioned in passing that Chen Xiliang 陳希亮 (1014–1077), Shen Gua 沈括 (1031–1095), Su Xie 蘇懈 (1069–1092), and Wang Shen at some stage all made ink.⁶⁵ It is unclear, however, whether “making” meant commissioning private supplies, mixing together other products, selecting ingredients for artisans, or personally manufacturing lampblack. To parse what ink production entails in these cases demands first resolving how Su Shi conceived of and narrated his own engagements with this technology.

Efforts to resolve this interpretative dilemma center upon determining the role of another ink maker from Jiangxi named Pan Heng 潘衡 (n.d.), a curious double for the recently deceased Pan Gu, who allegedly joined Su Shi in Hainan. In Su's own version of events, he taught this second Pan how to process fine soot:

When Pan Heng of Jinhua 金華 first arrived in Dan'er 儋耳 [a Hainan prefecture], he set up a furnace to make ink, and although the soot was plentiful, his ink was rather unrefined. I taught him to set up a chimney at a remove from a spacious furnace, which yields only half the quantity of soot, yet the ink was like *this*. Their stamped labels read: “Hainan Pine Soot, Dongpo's Ink Technique” (Hainan songmei Dongpo fa mo 海南松煤東坡法墨 [fig. 2]), and they are all exquisite. One should guard against ink makers stealing and using labels, which might cause those who get the ink to feel suspicious.⁶⁶

Ye Mengde 葉夢得 (1077–1148) and Lu You (fl. fourteenth century) accept Su Shi's account of his role as Pan Heng's teacher at face

⁶⁵ Lu Qingbin, “Su Shi dui mo wenhua,” p. 413.

⁶⁶ Italics added to emphasize that Su is writing with the ink he describes; Su Shi, “Shu Pan Heng mo” 書潘衡墨, in SSWJ, v. 19, j. 70, mod-p. 7975.

value.⁶⁷ He Wei, however, disputes certain details in Su's story, suggesting that Su did not concoct his ingredients or attend to the furnace but merely supervised Pan Heng's work:

Recently members of the gentry have taken to messing around with brushes and ink. Due to their natural endowments and refinement, their creative impulses are quite extraordinary: men such as Wei Dan 韋誕 [zi Zhongjiang 仲將 (179–253)] of the Jin 晉 [period, 265–420]⁶⁸ or Zhang Yong 張永 [n.d.] of the [Liu 劉] Song 宋 [period, 420–479],⁶⁹ and there have been many since. However, not all of them made ink with their own hands; some simply instructed, whether to a greater or lesser extent, a talented artisan. This was the case with Master Dongpo in Dan'er, hiring Pan Heng to make his ink before inscribing it "Hainan Pine Soot; Dongpo's Ink Technique."⁷⁰

The two accounts differ in their understanding of Su Shi's work as an ink maker yet agree that he was responsible for the inscription of these products.

These eight-character labels represent a fulfillment of Su's career-long preoccupation with the social life of ink—no longer just writing about the substance, but signing his own understated tablets, objects that eschew contemporaneous trends in decorative molding or ornamental embellishment (fig. 2). Su's markings—wavering between the indexical form of a signature ("I made this") and a charismatic brand designed to personalize a line of impersonal products—encapsulate many of the contradictions that lie behind his writings on writing implements. If Su's Hainan experiments espouse a carefree spontaneity, his inscriptions display a calculated assertion of proprietorship, raising the value of his gifts for collectors, manipulating the market conditions he professed to spurn.

Su's embrace of ink making reads as an effort to bypass the mediating presence of a hired artisan—as a scholar's attempt, amid the commodification and rampant counterfeiting of ink makers' labels, to regain custodianship of his tools. He Wei nevertheless cautions his readers that the guise of the scholar-ink maker, despite a pretense of

⁶⁷ Ye Mengde, *Bishu luhua* 避暑錄話, 2 juan, in vol. 863 of SKQS, j. 1, mod-p. 639; Lu You, *Moshi*, j. 2, mod-p. 669.

⁶⁸ Li Xiaomei, *Mopu fashi*, j. 2, mod-p. 645; Lu You, *Moshi*, j. 2, mod-p. 656.

⁶⁹ Lu You, *Moshi*, j. 2, mod-p. 657.

⁷⁰ He Wei, "Nanhai songmei" 南海松煤, in *Chunzhu jiwen*, j. 8, mod-p. 125. Cf. Pak-sheung Ng, "Regional Cultural Tradition," p. 93.

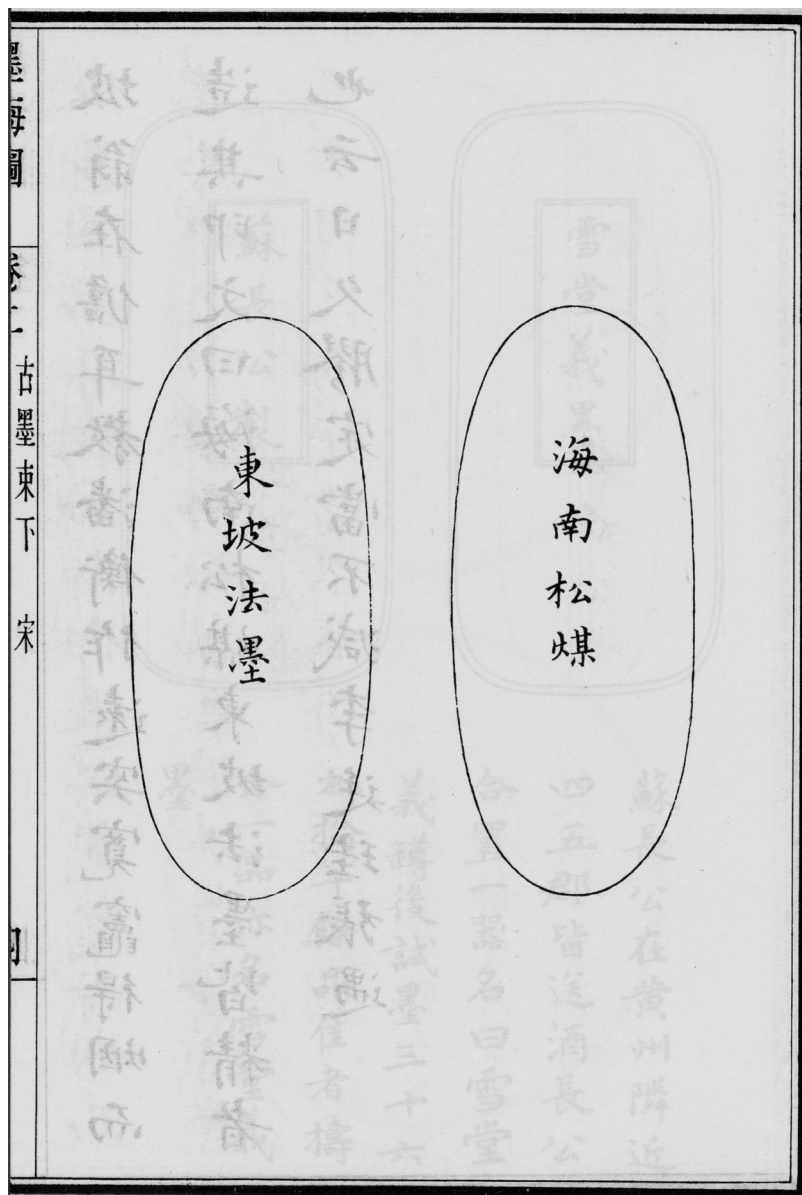


FIG. 2 Su Shi's Ink Cake. This seventeenth-century illustration is based on the description in Su Shi's colophon, "Shu Pan Heng mo" 書潘衡墨. It is titled Hainan Pine Soot (Hainan songmei 海南松煤; right), with a maker's mark, Dongpo's Ink Technique (Dongpo fa mo 東坡法墨; left). In contrast to Pan Gu's ink cake (fig. 1), this design lacks any ornamental details, advancing an aesthetic of simplicity and restraint. Source: Fang Ruisheng, "Gumo shu xia," in *Mohai tu*, in *Sheyuan mocui*, v. 5, j. 2, p. 4a. Image courtesy of Harvard-Yenching Library.

independence, still rests upon the command (*ling* 令) or subordination of artisanal labor—with the scholar seeking to replace, while mimicking the very form of, an artisanal maker's mark.⁷¹ In any event, Su acknowledges the uncertainties that the significance attributed to his label might provoke—a fear that his title could be easily forged, causing confusion among customers as to the qualities of his wares. Thus, he finally falls into the trap he had all along warned collectors to avoid.

Unlike Pan Gu, Pan Heng appears to have personally benefited from his contact with Su Shi. Ye Mengde records that Pan outlived Su and, upon returning to the markets of Hangzhou, sold his ink cakes for double their initial value on account of his connection to the famed scholar: “He was able to gain a name through ink.”⁷² Ye's focus on Pan Heng's subsequent career suggests that an entrepreneurial artisan might take advantage of a scholar's reputation to market his name, inverting Su Shi's “use” of the ink maker and thus raising the question of who was ultimately using whom.⁷³ The critical issue in the Pan Heng case is not who made an ink cake—an amateur scholar posing as an artisan or a professional artisan commissioned by a scholar—but who possessed the authority to endorse its value and sanction its significance through inscription.

Pan Gu's death encapsulates a search for coherence between representation and materiality, between the literary portrayal and technical processes of ink production. The epithet of Ink Immortal attests to the integrity and enduring value of Pan Gu's wares; his corporeal transformation, resembling the dissolution of an inkstick, consummates a poetic omen. The Ink Immortal embodies a lyrical vision of transcendence and release, yet it is one ironically premised on the poet's acceptance of his dependencies on perishable tools. Su's ink poems effectively limn an aspiration for literary freedom that could only be attained by making do with the writer's enmeshment in a palpably material culture. Pan Heng, by contrast, eludes Su Shi's scene of pedagogical instruction, at once perturbing and taking advantage

⁷¹ He Wei reiterates that “making ink” meant inscribing ink cakes for Teng Yuanfa 滕元發 (1020–1090) and Chao Guanzhi 晁貫之 (*zi Ji* 季一; fl. ca. 1100); He Wei, “Ruanji chuguang mo” 軟劑出光墨 and “Ji Jitang mo ru xibi” 寄寂堂墨如犀壁, in *Chunzhu jiwen*, j. 8, mod-pp. 125, 126.

⁷² 亦由墨以得名; Ye Mengde, *Bishu luhua*, j. 1, mod-p. 639.

⁷³ Lu You, *Moshi*, j. 2, mod-p. 669. Cf. Lin Yutang, *The Gay Genius: The Life and Times of Su Tungpo* (New York: John Day, 1947), p. 382.

of mismatches between name and thing. The fragmentary details of his career sow doubt as to whether “Dongpo’s Ink Technique” even belonged to the poet in the first place. Pan Heng’s fate instead illuminates a prevailing theme in Song records, that literary celebrations of ink making can be read as provoked by, or conceived as defensive reactions to, increasingly sophisticated forms of artisanal self-designation through writing. Regardless of his intentions, Su Shi’s name became entangled with the production and evaluation of inkstick inscriptions, transforming what had been an artisanal practice of marking things into a medium of literary expression. It was such charismatic labels, more than any other development, that undermined clear-cut distinctions between the agencies of writers and artisans.

Afterlives of the Ink Immortal

Throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties, ink makers returned to Su Shi’s poems about Pan Gu to advertise their wares in an increasingly competitive market for writing instruments. Prominent ink makers in Huizhou 徽州 (Anhui)—such as Pan Yingzhi 潘膺祉 (*zi* Fangkai 方凱; fl. Wanli 萬曆 era [1572–1620]), who was regarded as one of the four leading ink makers of the late Ming—went so far as to claim lineal descent from Pan Gu.⁷⁴ Yingzhi marketed his ink under the brand name Open Appearance of Heaven Ink (Kaitian rong mo 開天容墨), an allusion drawn from the final line of Su Shi’s first poem about Sun Jue’s gift of Pan Gu’s ink (dated 1085). This label was stamped onto the sides of Yingzhi’s inksticks to certify his unique recipe of soot and glue.⁷⁵ At the same time, Pan Yingzhi edited a woodblock catalog of literary appraisals (*zan* 贊) and inscriptions (*ming* 銘) celebrating his Open Appearance brand name and soliciting endorsements from such acclaimed figures in the Ming literary field as the playwright Zang Maoxun 臧懋循 (1550–1620) and prose-stylist Yuan Zhongdao 袁中道 (1570–1626). Pan Yingzhi’s catalog of autographs—rendered in a style known as “written carving” (*xieke* 寫刻)—approximates the appear-

⁷⁴ Pan Zhiheng, “Mo zong xu” 墨宗敘, in *Pan Yingzhi mopeng* 潘膺祉墨評, ed. Gu Qiyuan 顧起元 (1565–1628), in *Mopu jicheng* 墨譜集成, ed. Gudaobian weihui 古道編委會, 4 vols. (Xi’an: Sanqin chubanshe, 2006), v. 3, mod-pp. 1188–89.

⁷⁵ On the success of Pan’s brand, see Xie Zhaozhi 謝肇淛, *Wu za zu* 五雜俎, 16 *juan*, ed. Fu Cheng 傅成 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012), j. 12, mod-p. 216.

ance of a signed manuscript, with leading poets using Open Appearance of Heaven Ink to write poems in praise of Open Appearance of Heaven Ink. In this case, the ink maker masquerades as a literary editor, presenting his product as the resonant title of a poetry anthology. Open Appearance of Heaven Ink, in turn, took on its own life as other Qing ink makers irreverently appropriated the brand for their own ink lines.⁷⁶

Fang Ruisheng 方瑞生 (*zi* Danxuan 澹玄; fl. Wanli era) went further than any other Ming ink maker in formulating analogies between literature and ink production, claiming that “Wanli ink is just like the poetry of the High Tang.”⁷⁷ Fang adapted Su Shi’s ink verse to organize his encyclopedia of inksticks, *Sea of Ink (Mohai)*.⁷⁸ One of the chapters, “Case of Immortal’s Ink” (“Xianmo han” 仙墨函), is a collection of writings and illustrated designs based on the poetry of Li Bai, the “Banished Immortal,” and of Su Shi, or “Immortal Po.”⁷⁹

In this chapter, Fang includes transcriptions of all nine of Su Shi’s ink poems (beginning with his eulogy to Pan Gu), before offering a set of thirty rectangular inkstick designs bearing slogans drawn from these texts.⁸⁰ These immortal-ink designs pair lines from Su Shi’s accounts of Pan Gu with inkstick titles of Fang’s devising. For example, the line “His linen shirt is smeared a pitch black . . .” (from Su’s “For Pan Gu”) is paired with the title “Ink Pool Lotus” (Mochi lian 墨池蓮), thus becoming an epithet for Pan’s corporeal transformation (fig. 3). “Whose dark glow emits extraordinary thoughts” is paired with the title “Penumbra Pearl” (Xiangwang zhu 象罔珠), thus becoming an image for the inscrutability of the Way. By excerpting and recycling Su’s verse, Fang Ruisheng reconceives of the inkstick as a surface for the display of poetry.

⁷⁶ Wang Jinsheng 汪近聖, *Wangshi Jiangu zhai mosou: bufen juan* 汪氏鑑古齋墨叢: 不分卷, in vol. 1114 of *Xuxiu Siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1996), mod-p. 679.

⁷⁷ 墨之在萬曆, 猶詩之有盛唐; Fang Ruisheng, “Longbin cheng” 龍賓乘, in *Mohai tu* 墨海圖 (*waiji* 外輯), 7 *juan*, in *Mohai* 墨海, ed. Fang Ruisheng, in vol. 80 of *Congshu jicheng xubian* 叢書集成續編 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 1994), j. 4, p. 28a.

⁷⁸ Lu Qingbin, “Su Shi dui mo wenhua,” p. 424.

⁷⁹ Fang Ruisheng, “Xianmo han,” in *Mohai shu* 墨海書 (*neiji* 內輯), 3 *juan*, in *Mohai*, j. 2.

⁸⁰ Cai Meifen 蔡玫芬 [Ts’ai Mei-fen], “Mingdai de moshu” 明代的墨書, in *Zhonghua Minguo jianguo ba shi nian Zhongguo yishu wenwu taolunhui lunwenji* 中華民國建國八十年中國藝術文物討論會論文集/International Colloquium on Chinese Art History, 1991, *Proceedings*, 4 vols. (ce 冊) (Taipei: Guoli gugong bowuyuan, 1992), v. 4 (*Qiwu* 器物/Antiquities, part 2), p. 693.



FIG. 3 Fang Ruisheng's Inkstick. In Fang's seventeenth-century design, the inkstick's name (left), Ink Pool Lotus (Mochi lian 墨池蓮), is paired with lines from Su Shi's poem "For Pan Gu" (right): "His linen shirt is smeared a pitch black, and his hands resemble cracked turtle shells, / But it has still not scarred this ice pot that holds the autumn moon." Source: Fang Ruisheng, "Xianmo han" 仙墨函, in *Mohai shu* 墨海書, in *Sheyuan mocui*, v. 4, j. 2, p. 4a. Image courtesy of Harvard-Yenching Library.

In addition to the title “Immortal Ink,” Fang Ruisheng repurposed lines from Su Shi’s poems about Pan Gu to conceptualize core precepts for the connoisseurship of the substance.⁸¹ In a chapter named “Synthesis of Ink Discourse” (“Shuo mo he”), Fang sketched his own proto-philosophy, offering a set of guidelines for the judgment of ink based on the imagery in Su’s poems about Pan Gu:

The character for “clarity” (*qing* 清) comes from water (*shui* 水); when water and the moon (*yue* 月) appear, such clarity is like an ice pot (*binghu* 冰壺). Immortal Po dedicated a poem to Pan Gu that read: “His linen shirt is smeared a pitch black, and his hands resemble cracked turtle shells, / But it has still not scarred this ice pot that holds the autumn moon.” “Clarity of the moon” means that clouds cannot obscure its form. “Clarity of water” means that dirt cannot sully its authenticity. With ink, if the soot is fine and the glue is fresh, if it has been well beaten with a pestle and steamed smooth, the color does not stain one’s hands, the luster is striking, and then it is an autumn moon in an ice pot.⁸²

Su Shi based his image of Pan Gu—an autumn moon in an ice pot—on the properties of his inksticks; here, Fang Ruisheng uses Su’s account of Pan Gu as the Ink Immortal to test and reevaluate the quality of a superlative inkstick. Fang imaginatively considers how Su Shi’s image is assembled from component parts of the character for *qing* (clarity, purity): water (*shui*, radical 氵) and the moon (*yue*). As Fang seeks to break apart and extract new meaning from Su Shi’s lines of verse, a coherent image of Pan Gu once more dissolves into the physical metamorphoses of writing fluids. In line with his “immortal” designs, showing Su’s words emanating from within the visual frame of an inkstick, Fang Ruisheng’s precepts seek to close the gap between the meaning of an ink poem and the sensuousness of the thing it describes.

I conclude with these late Ming reappraisals of the Ink Immortal to demonstrate the lasting significance of Su Shi’s writing about Pan Gu for Chinese literary and material cultures. Su Shi’s embrace of ink making was motivated by an underlying concern with defending poets’ autonomy. And yet, as the careers of Pan Heng and later Ming merchants like Pan Yingzhi start to suggest, enterprising ink makers

⁸¹ Fang Ruisheng, table of contents (*mulu* 目錄) to “Shuo mo he” 說墨合, in *Mohai shu*, j. 3, pp. 1a–b.

⁸² Fang Ruisheng, “Qingyuan shen” 清遠神, in “Shuo mo he,” in *Mohai shu*, j. 3, p. 1a–2b.

could appropriate Su Shi's words to advance their own contentious claims to literary clout. Prominent Huizhou ink manufacturers—the self-proclaimed descendants of Pan Gu—returned to the imagery and language of the Ink Immortal poems to fashion themselves as poets.

Following Su Shi, ink making became a venue where distinctions between scholar and artisan identities could be contested and remade. Prominent Ming ink manufacturers claimed to have given up careers as poets to pursue ink making, while leading Neo-Confucian scholars sponsored and endorsed lines of commercial ink.⁸³ By writing poetry on the surface of an inkstick, early modern ink makers vied to reanimate the properties of this seemingly mundane tool. As with Su Shi's initial praise for the Ink Immortal, such efforts read as fraught attempts to secure a lasting link between a name and an endlessly mutable substance.

⁸³ Cai Meifen, "Mingdai de moshu," pp. 707–8.